Antisemitism in the Gilded Age: The Jewish View

by Naomi W. Cohen

Over the past twenty-five years, several significant studies have appeared on the genesis of American antisemitism. Although no consensus has been reached on whether hostility toward Jews was an example of ethnic prejudice which was also felt by the Irish, Italians, and Germans, or whether it more closely resembled religious bigotry experienced by Catholics, most scholars agree that it was not significant until the last quarter or even last decade of the nineteenth century. Some accounts have noted the ambivalent feelings of Americans toward Jews along with a countervailing current of philosemitism, and a case has been made for distinguishing between ideological antisemitism, or the images of the Jew as Christ-killer and Shylock, and the actual eruption of discrimination. For the catalyst which triggered late nineteenth century hostility, status rivalry and narrow nationalism have been singled out as have the Populists and agrarian radicalism.¹

In all these studies, scant attention has been paid to the testimony of "the victims"—their interpretations of what threatened them, how seriously they took isolated attacks, and how they proposed to respond. Victims or participants are hardly the most objective analysts, but in this case the explanations by Jews who experienced or reported on nineteenth century antisemitism suggest parameters of the problem that historians have generally overlooked.

The term antisemitism was coined in western Europe in the 1870s² and only slowly came into use in the United States. American Jews did not refer to themselves as Semites; some even thought that it was more polite to say Israelite or Hebrew rather than Jew.³ There was less agreement on how to define a Jew. All said that he was first a member of a religious body, but they did not satisfactorily resolve how to designate a heritage which included components other than matters of faith. Since the term ethnic was unknown, they used loose labels—a people, a nationality, a race—with utter lack of consistency or precision. When they analyzed discrimination in the Gilded Age they generally saw themselves as victims of religious bigotry. Since prejudice affected the secularist and infidel as much as the observant Jew, however, they had to admit that, whatever its genesis, hostility against the Jews was directed
against an entire people.

American Jewish spokesmen would not have agreed that the Seligman-Hilton affair of 1877, often highlighted as the start of social discrimination, marked a novel departure in Christian behavior. The well-known story of the exclusion of the famous banker from Saratoga's Grand Union Hotel excited Christian America just because it involved Joseph Seligman, the head of the prominent banking firm and personal friend of President Grant. The Jews had noted social ostracism even before. In 1864, an article in the Jewish Messenger of New York stated that Jews were barred from the "favored circles of society." Two years later, it editorialized on the same theme: "We are unable to deny... that even among the so-called educated classes there is a distaste for, and apprehension of, fraternity for the Jew, which often inclines them to wish that their ancestors had not so readily granted liberty and equality to the non-Christian." Oscar Straus, who later became minister to Turkey and member of Theodore Roosevelt's cabinet, recorded his own taste of discrimination at that time. He entered Columbia College in 1867, where, he said, "I was under many disadvantages, comparatively poor, not as well dressed as most of my class-mates, with no social standing and a Jew. For the latter offense I was even excluded from the literary society of the undergraduates." That Christians shunned the presence of Jews was verified in a book about New York, written by reporter Matthew Hale Smith. Calling Jews a "nuisance to any Christian neighborhood," Smith described the reverse pattern of exclusiveness, i.e., how Christians deserted residential and resort areas when they became "infested" by Jews.

Other examples antedating the Seligman episode can be cited: want-ads in the daily press for boarders which specified "Jews need not apply"; hotels in eastern summer resorts which closed their doors to Jewish guests; a Baltimore lyceum which refused membership to Jews; the exclusion of Jewish applicants by the New York Bar Association. The evidence did not point only to patriotic snobbery, for the issue of boarders would not have concerned the upper class; nor were anti-Jewish slurs the exclusive domain of native Americans. A German glee club in New York refused to admit Jews as did a Masonic lodge in Massachusetts. In an attempt to keep their vision of the United States unblemished, American Jews liked to think that the prejudice they experienced came from Europe, brought over in the first instance by recent immigrants. Even if it had been, which is unlikely, it was not unknown in American circles before the 1870s.

True, the Seligman affair followed by the Corbin episode in 1879, which involved the plan to bar Jews from Manhattan Beach, heralded an increase in social exclusionary patterns as well as an awareness of their pervasiveness. However, to the Anglo-Jewish press which had exposed hostility to the Jew...
since the 1840s, nothing qualitatively new had transpired. The Jewish population in the United States did not reach 250,000 until 1880, but to nineteenth century Jews that was no reason to minimize the significance of earlier hostility. Since they did not distinguish between ideological Jew-hatred and actual discrimination—between a Good Friday sermon which charged them with deicide and a school which excluded Jewish students—the existence of antisemitism depended neither on numbers nor the visibility of Jews. "Rishuth" as they called it (literally Hebrew for wickedness) cropped up at different times and in various forms.

Jews living one hundred years ago would also have questioned the reasoning which fixed upon the 1870s on economic grounds. To say that by then the German Jews who had arrived in the 1840s and 1850s had attained positions of affluence, which in turn aroused jealousy and resentment, implies that their rapid mobility had gone unnoticed before. Not so, said Isaac Leeser, prominent Philadelphia rabbi and editor of the Occident, who was one of the most knowledgeable about the contemporary Jewish scene. He claimed as early as 1863 that the increase in numbers and prosperity of the Jews was attracting attention and causing a "sentiment inimical to Judaism." Two years later he added:

With the great increase of Hebrew residents in America, their general prosperity has also augmented in the same ratio, and in most large cities Jewish people occupy some of the finest residences. Now, if nothing else would cause prejudice, this circumstance will do so to a certainty. . . . While we are poor and unsightly, we may be tolerated; but let us only look up, and become the social equals of our neighbors, and their ire will be at once roused.

The American Israelite, the influential organ of reform Judaism under the editorship of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise of Cincinnati, explained that the seeds of social prejudice had been sown during the Civil War. At that time, according to the paper, the mischief was started in Washington, D. C. by public figures and newspaper correspondents who delighted in vilifying the Jew. This alarming upsurge of prejudice testified to the social upheaval brought about by the war: "A revolution of the government had just been accomplished, and the highest had become the lowest, and the lowest had become the highest. . . . [A] lower stratum had been brought to the surface, and with it all the virtues and vices of upstarts in this world; hence also prejudices against the Jew." Washington society was infected, and the poison spread throughout the country, leaving long lasting damage to Jewish/Christian relations.

That same editorial mentioned a second, and indeed, more substantial cause of the new Jew-hatred. It blamed the religious revival begun during the war and carried over into the political arena for wielding a "nugatory influence" on the behavior of Christians toward Jews. Wise's line of reasoning,
which merits consideration in light of some aspects of religious ferment in the postwar period, not only points to the earlier terminus a quo for nineteenth century antisemitism but indicates as well the need to look beyond social competition or agrarian radicalism for an understanding of anti-Jewish sentiment in the Gilded Age.

1

Christian religious teachings always constituted a significant component of antisemitism. Although Christianity recognized the importance of Judaism, the foundation on which it rested, it taught that the mother faith had been bypassed by the new revelation. The Jews, the original children of Israel, had rejected the messiahship of Jesus and crucified him. For that crime, they became a despised and persecuted people and their faith inferior and subservient to Christianity. The settlers of the New World brought these doctrines with them from Europe, and long before they had actual contacts with Jews their opinions of "the Jew" were fixed. They wrote their views into their law codes and state constitutions. History books and fiction as well as sermons and theological tracts kept the images alive in the nineteenth century, and so did the spellers, readers, and geographies which were used in the country's schoolrooms. Missionaries who worked zealously to save the benighted souls stressed the pitiable state of Judaism; conversion, they promised the Jews, would purify them and uplift them.  

Well into the nineteenth century, the Jews had ample reason to fear the influence of Christian teachings on their political rights and status in society. Orthodox Protestants invoked the deicide charge in order to justify the retention of the ban against officeholding by Jews in Maryland. Governor J. H. Hammond of South Carolina saw no cause to formulate his Thanksgiving Day proclamation in nonsectarian terms; Jews whose ancestors had crucified Jesus had to understand that the United States was a Christian country. Another South Carolinian, Judge John O'Neal, wrote into a Sunday law decision that Christianity was the source and standard of true morality. Many such disabilities and slurs were cleared up when Jews or their defenders raised the issue. If, however, traditional intolerance were invigorated by new religious agitation, the prospects for total amelioration could grow dimmer. Thus, when the Jews as a group denounced the spirit of Know-Nothingism, it was not because of a love for Catholics but from fear that any minority group could become a target for renewed persecution if one denomination could dominate others. Some were uneasy too about the antebellum reform movements such as temperance and abolition, which in large measure were spurred by the social activism of the churches. If they became religious causes, those crusades,
no different from the Sunday law agitation, harbored the possibility of an adverse fallout on a non-Christian minority. Furthermore, as long as public officials acted out the precepts of fundamentalist Christianity, and as long as Christian leaders fused those precepts with political activity, it was meaningless to distinguish between ideological Jew-hatred and overt hostility.

Before the Civil War, the Jews reacted to separate instances of disabilities or prejudice in pragmatic fashion. It would have been futile to champion the absolute separation of Church and state, for the social climate of the age underscored the importance of organized religion. Also, since it was unlikely that Christians would modify their teachings radically or quickly, Jews believed that they could do little more than ask for public recognition, at least under law, of Judaism's equality with Christianity. This was their approach whether fighting for the right to hold office or to gain exemption from Sunday laws for those who kept Saturday as a holy day, or when renouncing the Christian wording of Thanksgiving Day proclamations or sectarian teaching in the public schools. They pleaded that their faith inculcated principles of virtue and good citizenship and that its followers were entitled to the same civic privileges enjoyed by others. When New York's oldest synagogue petitioned the state legislature for aid to its religious school, it asked only for "the same countenance and encouragement which has been exhibited to others." Often Jews invoked the American principle of freedom of religion to silence their detractors. In reality, however, they were fusing two concepts under that rubric, freedom of conscience and equality of religion.

New heights in Jew hatred were reached during the Civil War. In the fall of 1862 General Grant expelled the Jews as a class from military territories in the border states on the grounds that they were engaged in illegal trading ventures beyond the Union lines. Understandably, American Jewry was stunned. This act was qualitatively different from the more typical slights they suffered when Lincoln ordered strict observance of Sunday in the armed forces (and did not consider privileges for Sabbath observers) and when Congress decided against providing for Jewish chaplains. Again, Isaac Leeser found the underlying source for the order and America's willingness to accept it in Christian prejudice. The church, he said, "is the seat of danger to liberty of conscience and perhaps the permanence of free institutions of all kinds." Leeser bitterly attacked the secular press for keeping silent: "[T]he matter did not concern them of course, the parties threatened with such ill-usage were not Christians, not even negroes, nothing but Jews! . . . and those, every one knows, are enemies of Christ and his apostles."
which he, like Wise, interpreted to mean increased hostility toward the Jew. The war had inflamed religious passion; Jews, despite their military service in both the Union and Confederacy, were singled out for all sorts of “crimes.” In the North where the churches had thrown themselves into the antislavery movement, abolition was considered a victory for Christianity, and Jews were criticized for not having been sufficiently outspoken against slavery. Their general prosperity nurtured the mounting antipathy, for how could unbelievers enjoy earthly rewards which rightly belonged to members of the saving church?²⁴

More threatening was the possibility that the new religious fervor would spill over into the political area and cause dissenters from the majority position to forfeit civil rights. Despite America’s tradition of religious freedom, that possibility did not appear too far-fetched after a war which signaled a major constitutional and social upheaval, particularly to a people whose history was punctuated by suffering at the hands of churches or church-dominated states. No wonder then that Jews took seriously the growing momentum of the movement to engraft Christianity upon the Constitution. Just before the war, a small group of Presbyterians had met in Allegheny, Pennsylvania, and petitioned the Senate for a constitutional amendment acknowledging the authority of God, Jesus, and Scriptural law. After 1861 the group drew support from the belief that the destruction and suffering of the war were marks of God’s vengeance against a nation which was not sufficiently Christian. By 1863 the movement was considerably more significant, having attracted other denominations and even some prominent public officials, and it continued to expand from year to year. Jews derived hope for its defeat in the divisions which precluded a unified stand among the multiple Protestant denominations, but Leeser, for one, sketched the dire results should rights to vote or hold office be predicated upon a religious base.²⁵

Lesser’s apprehensions, which were shared by the young Jewish defense agency, the Board of Delegates of American Israelites, resulted in a remonstrance to the Senate against the amendment by the Board. Still more interesting was the Occident’s tacit admission that America was not different. Just as Jews throughout their history had lived with persecution spawned by religious bigotry so would they face similar cycles of both tribulation and respite in the United States.²⁶

The promoters of the constitutional amendment organized themselves into a national association and dispatched a delegation to present their aims to President Lincoln. After the war, clergymen and religious periodicals took up the cause and spread the message that it was both “an error and an evil” for the Constitution not to acknowledge God or Jesus. The association, standing for a Christian nation resting on Christian beliefs, pitted itself against those “bane-
ful" views which were being heard in politics: "That civil government is only a social compact; That it exists only for secular and material, not for moral ends; That Sabbath Laws are unconstitutional, and that the Bible must be excluded from our Public Schools." If the stated purpose alone did not prove that the association included Jews among its opponents, the speeches at the national conventions were more explicit. One clergyman uttered a blanket condemnation: "The enemies of our movement naturally draw into their ranks all infidels, Jews, Jesuits, and all opposers of Him who is Lord over all, our Lord Jesus Christ." Another cited the "confederacy of the Jesuit and Jew, infidel and atheist" for attacking the Bible in the schools. Those elements had no common aim, "but they have stricken hands like Herod and Pontius Pilate in the common work of crucifying Christ."  

The Jews could not ignore the movement, especially since it was headed in the early 1870s by Supreme Court Justice William Strong and included several governors, state judicial officers, and academicians among its vice presidents. The *Jewish Messenger* argued several points at once: the greatness of the Constitution and the Founding Fathers just because they eschewed an established religion; the evils of a Church/state combination; and the fact that Jewish teachings were the base of so-called Christian virtue. When in 1874 the House Judiciary Committee turned down the association's petition for an amendment, the paper happily suggested that the members offer their services to Bismarck (who was having trouble with the Church) or to the "valorous women who expect to conquer the rum sellers by prayer." 

The clamor for an amendment abated for a while but other manifestations of religious intolerance persisted. New Hampshire did not permit non-Protestants to hold office until 1877. In Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, Jews were far more numerous, but those states still required all to refrain from work on the Christian Sabbath despite their possible observance of Saturday as the day of rest. The Centennial Exhibition held in Philadelphia in 1876 was closed on Sundays in deference to Christian pressure, and Jews felt slighted still further when Bishop Matthew Simpson, who offered the opening prayer, referred to America's Christian civilization. It was strange, the *American Israelite* observed, that in the year celebrating a century of progress and enlightenment, such anachronisms, inconsistencies, and hypocrisies could still exist. Yet Americans had been governed by "rings, cliques and vestrys [sic]" since 1861; when priests and deacons decided otherwise, the Constitution and the statutes on religious liberty were not insurmountable. Jews wanted no special legislation, the paper insisted, but merely freedom based upon justice and equality. 

The winter of 1875–76 also marked a high point in the revivalist crusade of Reverend Dwight L. Moody. The popular preacher, who reached tens of thousands through meetings conducted in major cities, did not ignore the Jews.
Not only did he repeat the deicide accusation—recounting the story of the crucifixion in gripping, dramatic detail—but he also once claimed that at a meeting of one thousand Jews in Paris in 1873 they had boasted of killing the Christian's God. Rabbi Sabato Morais of Philadelphia, the city in which the incident took place, said: “None of us would have believed, before he undertook an ostensibly holy mission, that the attempt to inflame the passions of multitudes against law-abiding Hebrews would have been tried . . . two days before the Centennial year was ushered in.” Moody was denounced in the secular and Jewish press and the story of the Paris meeting exposed as a falsehood. Isaac Mayer Wise challenged Moody repeatedly to debate the deicide charge, but the latter took no notice. He later claimed that he had been misquoted, that he never passed a Jew without wanting to take off his hat to the people who were destined to convert the world to Christianity. That Moody was interested in converting Jews was true. That he honored them is highly questionable, for years later he had no qualms about inviting Adolf Stoecker, ex-court chaplain and notorious Jew-baiter of Bismarck’s Germany, to share a pulpit with him.

Moody spelled danger to Jewish spokesmen because he appealed to emotions instead of reason and because he invoked inflammatory images. Furthermore, like all evangelical Protestants, he stood for a religious or Protestant base for American society. To write him off as an illiterate demagogue, however, the way the American Israelite tried to do, was inaccurate. Moody was not the stereotyped backwoods revivalist. He was the preacher who brought traditional religion to native Americans on the urban frontier, and his messages bridged their former way of life with the new industrial reality. His audiences were middle class in aspirations and values—he even had the financial support of some postwar millionaires—uncomfortable as yet with the Darwinist and secularist challenges to religion. Moody shared their attitudes; he identified with businessmen and applied business principles to his own revival campaign.

Indeed, nineteenth century Jews overlooked the real significance that Moody's crusade may have held for them. It is conceivable that those he addressed, not of the patrician class but pushing to be in society, were of the same cloth as those most eager to exclude Jews from summer resorts. Also, Moody's religious message may well have intensified the feeling of those Christian businessmen competing with the Jews for social status.

A constitutional amendment, Dwight Moody, Sunday laws and the Centennial—all in the decade when social discrimination began claiming increased attention. Therefore, to connect religious ferment with the discrimination, the way Rabbi Wise did, was not unreasonable. If Christian hostility were a constant, the degree of political and social activism on the part of religious groups or individuals could account at least in part for changes in attitude or
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ups and downs in eruptions of prejudice. It was an aggressive Christianity, the American Israelite explained, one which saw itself superior to other religions, which was out of harmony with modern ideas of liberty and justice.35

3

Jewish spokesmen remained alert in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to the causes undertaken by militant Protestants. The latter were then seeking popular support and protective legislation in a desperate attempt to stem the sweeping currents of secularization. Their particular concern was the city, where new industrial patterns were undermining fixed social traditions and where hordes of Catholic and Jewish immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were neutralizing the Protestant flavor of established customs. To retain the religious component of Americanism as they knew it, they breathed new life into old ventures, such as missionary drives, Bible reading and sectarian teachings in the public schools, the religious amendment movement (which sputtered again in the 1890s), prohibition, and stricter Sunday laws. The last was spurred significantly in the 1880s by the work of the National Reform Association and the WCTU, and reached a climax in Senator Henry Blair’s bills of 1888 and 1890 proposing a national day of rest.36

On most of those issues the Jewish press had long since recorded its opposition, and its favorite targets remained the missionaries, Sunday laws, and sectarianism in the schools.37 Since Jews recognized that the different causes and their sponsors were connected in the underlying purpose of safeguarding Christian morality through law, they also denounced any incident, no matter how insignificant, which could be construed as an entering wedge. Thus, they noted and criticized gubernatorial proclamations addressed to Christian citizens,38 the demand to close the 1893 Chicago Fair on Sunday,39 the attempt in New York to make Good Friday a legal holiday,40 and even a proposal by the congressional representative from the territory of Wyoming for paintings on the Capitol walls depicting the life of Jesus. That last episode, incidentally, was upsetting, since members of Congress upbraided its sponsor not for his idea but merely for his insertion of a lengthy, undelivered, speech into the Congressional Record.41

What the Jews resented as much as the inconveniences which Sunday laws worked on Sabbath observers or the psychological alienation which sectarian teachings in the public schools meant for their children42 was the stigma of second-class citizenship inherent in the concept of a legally recognized Christian country.43 Their fear that religious activism produced a higher popular level of anti-Jewish hostility seemed to have been borne out, too. The American Israelite, for example, noted bitterly that a minister injected the deicide...
charge in an argument with a rabbi about Sunday laws in Arkansas, while a Methodist newspaper singled out the Jews for blame when voters rejected prohibition in North Carolina. At the end of the century Jews strongly deplored the anti-Catholic activity of the American Protective Association, for they were combating the very same forces of religious bigotry. Some even feared that the prejudice against Catholics might be turned upon them. It is not surprising, therefore, that as they watched the injection of religious issues into politics, American Jews gravitated increasingly into a position favoring a secularist state.

Jews were also uneasy about ministers and priests who attacked the Jews and could thereby fan the flames of popular hostility. While the mainstream of the American clergy would never have condoned downright Jew-baiting, individual hatemongers arose from the evangelical or missionary elements. Preaching antisemitism was not necessarily their purpose, but they invoked stock motifs of antisemitic propaganda in delivering messages usually related to the fulfillment of biblical prophecies. For example, in 1879 Reverend L. C. Newman (probably a missionary for the Society for the Promotion of Christianity Among the Jews) lectured in New York on “Jerusalem and Its Future.” He lauded the achievements of the Jews in the face of incessant persecution and he predicted their restoration to Palestine and the emergence of Jerusalem as the “metropolis of the world.” In the course of his remarks, which were devoid of any malice, he said: “They [the Jews] control the finances of Europe . . . and they are now more prosperous than at any time since the destruction of Jerusalem. The Jewish community throughout the world is united by a bureau of correspondence and they hold conventions, to which delegates come from the outermost parts of the earth.” Around the same time a preacher in Washington repeated the theme that Jews like the Jesuits were organized into societies throughout the world and that their organization had ordered their return to Palestine. Some twenty years later, Reverend Doctor Isaac Haldeman of New York’s First Baptist Church discoursed on the degree of Jewish economic power. Already the financial masters of the world, they would soon control all the professions: all this since God promised them the wealth of the gentiles before restoring them to their own land. The next stage prior to their ultimate conversion called for an anti-Christ arising from among the Jews who would “devastate the nations of Europe and build up a kingdom in Palestine.” Haldeman, similar to others, was concerned with restoration to Palestine as a harbinger of Jewish conversion, but in the meantime, he joined in spreading charges of an international Jewish secret organization and of Jewish economic domination over the gentiles.

The antisemitic themes were more carefully worked out in a full-length book (printed in two editions) by Samuel H. Kellogg, a Presbyterian missionary
who in 1878 became Professor of Theology at Western Theological Seminary. Kellogg postulated that everything that had happened or would happen to the Jews was foretold in Old and New Testament prophecies. According to divine plan, Jews were accumulating the wealth of the world from the gentiles who had oppressed them, while simultaneously gaining control of the press and prominence in world politics. Kellogg documented those new charges primarily from European sources; he drew much from Stoecker and, in his second edition, from Édouard Drumont, the notorious Jew-baiter in France. More interesting was how Kellogg pinpointed the fulfillment of the prophecy that Israel would be God’s instrument for the overthrow of the gentiles. Not only were Jews currently engaged in abusing and denigrating Christianity, Kellogg said, but they also were responsible for the birth of pantheistic rationalism (Spinoza) and of socialism and communism (Marx, Lasalle, et al.). The same people who had crucified the Messiah had engineered these deadly assaults upon Christian civilization.

Kellogg’s work was used and embellished by a Reverend L. B. Woolfolk of Cincinnati whose book Great Red Dragon also appeared in two editions. The Dragon, drawn from an image in Revelations, symbolized the evolution of the “Money Power” or the Jewish economic masters of the world. The Money Power worked secretly and underhandedly as it dispossessed honest labor and asserted control over all aspects of commerce and manufacturing. Through organization, political manipulation, and the use of carefully placed agents, it worked solely for its own gain while threatening the survival of republican institutions and Christian churches. A union of the money evil with the devil, the Dragon was the anti-Christ and the head of the Money Power the destined Jewish messiah.

Just how many people were influenced by such clergymen is impossible to estimate, but those who were could not help but fear and hate the Jews. Even if they accepted the view that the Jew’s behavior conformed to biblical prophecies and would ultimately bring about the millennium, it was not a cheerful prospect to be one of the generation to fall to the Jew on his way to salvation. More likely there were those who would remember the power and danger of the Jew much sooner than the biblical message.

For the historian looking back, the preachers and their theories attest to the interplay of European and American thinking about the Jews. They also represent a stage in the evolution and public acceptance of full-blown, twentieth century antisemitic ideology. While they legitimized Jewish behavior—God designated Israel to be the “torch of fire” among the gentiles, the “lion among sheep”—they were also legitimizing the antisemitic assertions about the incalculable power wielded by the Jews. By fusing religious imagery with selected “facts” from the nineteenth century industrial world, they made
antisemitism relevant to the present. They updated the garb of the Jew, but whether he took the form of Satan, Rothschild, Spinoza, or Marx, his threat remained constant: the Jew conspired to destroy Christianity and Christian civilization.

The Populists did not care about conversion of the Jews but they too coupled religious imagery with references to Jewish conspiracy and money power. Indeed, how better than in Bryan's Cross of Gold metaphor could that fusion have been expressed? In the election of 1896 many political speakers talked of Christian principles and deicide while blasting the Jewish gold conspiracy and the Republican party. The GOP, some said, had clearly sold out to the Jews, for why else would a rabbi have been selected as chaplain of the Republican convention. Mary Ellen Lease summed it up this way:

The aristocracy of gold... despises government, it tramples upon the rights of individuals, it scoffs at justice, it sneers at everyone, makes the golden rule subservient to the golden calf, and has made the Christian nations of the earth collecting agents for the house of Rothschilds, who have sent their agents to our shores to open up the national Republican convention with prayer and draw up the platform of the national Republican party.53

More common than the religious stereotypes were Populist slurs on the House of Rothschild and on Shylocks and "hook nosed usurers." None of these motifs, however, was any more original than the deicide charge. Jewish money power, synonymous with or symbolized by the Rothschild name and expanded to mean avarice and dishonesty in business, was a theme widespread in popular culture long before the Populists. The rapid upward mobility of American Jews added to it.54 The images cut across class and sectional lines. A Granger pamphlet of 1873 described the cupidity of the "wandering Jew" and patrician Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote even earlier of his "inherited feelings of aversion" to the "snaky usurer" and "ducat-sweating thieves."55 Populists did not come up with any new ideas about the Jews; they purveyed traditional images in a common idiom. Similar to Kellogg and Woolfolk who antedated them, their Jew-baiting, albeit in secularist terms, consisted of identifying the Jew with the current devil or anti-Christ, in this case the gold interests.

On the other hand, Populist antisemitism was more than the equating of goldbug with Jew. Insofar as they singled out Jewish bankers and flung stock religious charges against them, Populists were harnessing the ever present level of anti-Jewish sentiment to an economic and political campaign. Probably those who spread the antisemitic line were antisemitic, apart from the Populist cause.56 It is doubtful that they made Jew-haters of any who were completely
untouched by the Shylock myth or by Christian religious beliefs about Jews. Their achievement was to vent the latent antipathy and popularize it. By linking Jews with serious and immediate economic issues, they made the “Jewish menace” more palpable and credible to an increasingly secularist society.

Before the Populist campaign, American Jews had noted and taken issue with the economic stereotypes used against them. They repeated frequently, but with little success, that the historical source for the character of Shylock was a Christian and not a Jew. Editors defended the Jewish bankers who were attacked in some circles after the demonetization of silver in 1873 and again after the gold crisis of 1893. After Terence Powderly denounced the indiscriminate charges blaming Jews for the financial problems of the country in the journal of the Knights of Labor, the leading Jewish newspapers reprinted the article.

Just because Populist rhetoric meant only more of the same, contemporary Jews were less concerned about the free silver campaign than the recent controversy over Populist antisemitism might lead one to expect. Jewish defensiveness, which usually climbed in direct proportion to the gravity of the situation was generally absent. Although the Jew-baiting situation which accompanied the convention and the electioneering was discussed, particularly by the midwestern Jewish papers, Jews never dreamed of mobilizing the community in a united stand on the “Jewish issue.” There was no concerted effort to appeal to or threaten the Democrats, or to ally with the Republicans. Indeed, much more discussion came from Jewish quarters in 1868 when Grant, the general who had expelled the Jews during the Civil War, was running for office. In 1896, Jewish leaders saw no reason to lift the longstanding self-imposed community ban on bloc voting and on injecting Jewish interests into American politics. The Jewish Voice of St. Louis was the most extreme; it campaigned against Populists but for McKinley. Rabbi Wise, a confirmed Democrat, allotted much space in his paper to the various antisemitic slurs, and he suggested that the Democratic National Committee repudiate them. Ultimately, however, he voted for Bryan. In the East, the conservative Jewish Messenger said “to God be the praise” when McKinley was elected, but its prime concern was the injurious effect that cheap money would have on the nation's credit and honor. The American Hebrew, which for the most part ignored the entire campaign, would only go so far: “If, unfortunately, the blight of the A. P. A. should be cast upon the nation during the coming campaign, it may be necessary for Jewish voters to emphasize their abhorrence of religious intolerance by the way they cast their votes; but that will be in their sovereign right as citizens and not as Jews.” Apparently the Democrats did lose Jewish votes because of the antisemitic overtones of their campaign, but there was at least one “Hebrew Populist” club as well as Jews in the East and West who
stood with Bryan.\textsuperscript{66}

In short, the antisemites among the Populists were written off as annoyances, unpleasant but relatively harmless. The \textit{American Israelite} called them "ignoramuses, fanatics and demagogos [sic]" who "fortunately in our country... are after all only a very small minority." That paper also reported how Jews were attacked by the other side—i.e. the coinage of silver at the ratio of 16:1 was "an old Jewish swindle"—and it fell back on the scapegoat theory as the only possible explanation:

In fact whatever does not suit the world is nowadays laid upon the shoulders of the Jews. Just as in times of old they were charged with being the cause why pestilence, famine, drought, floods and other calamities came upon communities, so to-day, the belief in the supernatural having declined, all troubles in the financial and commercial world, all disturbances between capital and labor are laid upon the back of the Jew.\textsuperscript{67}

Populism may have encouraged Jew-baiting and sectional receptivity to later "ignoramuses" or "fanatics", but it would take a Henry Ford, abetted by pseudoscientific race findings and the circulation of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, before agrarian based antisemitism could command a significant national following.

5

Jews did not fail to see factors other than religious influences that could incite social discrimination. Envy of Jewish affluence on the part of the nouveaux riches was one such cause. More significant, the rising middle class—ill-bred, with pretentious pseudo-aristocratic values—was using the trappings of exclusiveness in its scramble for social prestige.\textsuperscript{68} (Isaac Mayer Wise called the women of that class worse offenders than men, for they were the ones more directly influenced by the Church. For a while he insisted that discrimination was the fault of easterners whose caste-like distinctions could not take root in the freer West.)\textsuperscript{69} Since many Jews spoke with foreign accents and retained their foreign mannerisms, that also roused suspicion and disdain.\textsuperscript{70} Jew-baiters doubtless drew support too from the antisemitic ideas then fashionable in Germany, Austria, and Russia.\textsuperscript{71}

Jewish commentators agreed that ostentatious Jews, the loud and flashy parvenus and their jewel-bedecked women, were responsible for feeding the distaste which was directed against an entire group. Since popular ignorance about the Jew and his tradition was rife, and since Jews never bothered to dispel that ignorance, the gravity of their faults was compounded in the popular mind.\textsuperscript{72} Leading Jews called for self-improvement within the com-
munity. The *Jewish Messenger* in particular, which timidly cautioned its readers not to exaggerate the prejudice or to consider it different from hostility directed against other minority groups, frequently urged Jews to look to their manners.  

Nevertheless, most observers argued that boorishness was more an excuse than a cause. Vulgarity cut across class, religious, and ethnic lines; Christians also gambled and bet at races, and Christian women also "disport themselves at the seashore in indecent bathing costumes." Yet why was one entire people punished for the behavior of some? Self-improvement was not the surest solution for discrimination. This was an imperfect world, Judge Mayer Sulzberger of Philadelphia wrote, and "if all Jews behaved themselves properly there would be more prejudice than ever."  

As they pondered other reasons, writers in the Jewish press consistently held the position that religious hostility remained the source of the infection. The *American Hebrew*, a New York weekly begun in 1879 under the editorship of Philip Cowen, was perhaps the most outspoken on that score. Even the *Jewish Messenger*, more fearful of arousing controversy than its New York rival or Wise's *American Israelite*, could not deny the connection:  

The persistency of popular prejudice against the Jew is due to many factors . . . but the most fruitful . . . has been the religious training of the Christian. As most Christians have capacity to understand only the material elements in the crucifixion, they take a grim religious pleasure—a sense of duty done—in crucifying the Jew.  

To argue that many who discriminated against Jews were not churchgoers did not alter the case, for their prejudices had been instilled at an early age by religious training in schools and by a traditional Christian environment. Therefore, it was futile to look to churches and schools to end the discrimination, even though, as a few articles pointed out, Jesus and the apostles would also have been barred from the summer resorts.  

Writing in the *North American Review* in 1881, Nina Morais pointed to a history of civil disabilities, Jewish manners, and ignorance about Jews as the causes contributing to prejudice. At least equally culpable, however, were the antisemitic Christian teachings repeated in the nursery rhymes, the public schools, and missionary exhortations. As long as Christianity refused "further enlightenment," the results in society were inevitable.  

Under the circumstances, it is not wonderful that the ardent church-member should bestow some act of hatred upon the criminal, or that an involuntary aversion to the Jew should become a mental habit in the most indifferent Christian. To dislike the Hebrew *per se* is natural, whatever the causes of the dislike may be . . . [The prejudices against him] have been wrought in the very woof of Christianity.
For their part, many Christians denied that age-old doctrines could be faulted for what was transpiring in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Some said discrimination was a question of racial antagonism analogous to American hostility to the Blacks and Chinese. While a good number blamed Jewish manners (especially among the "lower" types) for awakening hostility, others pointed to the vulgarity of those who discriminated against Jews. On separate occasions writers in the New York Times and New York Herald suggested that Christians turn to prejudice because they fear the superiority of Jews.

On the other hand, many agreed that religious hostility was a primary cause, even though it might have been reduced to residual or even unconscious significance. George W. Curtis, editor of Harper's, wrote about the absence of true "soul liberty" in the United States; the root of anti-Jewish discrimination was the charge of deicide, "a terrible retribution" for what a "Syrian" mob did over two thousand years ago. The fact that some Christians pointed to Jewish violations of Christian sensibilities—such as disrespectful behavior on Sunday—also attested to the importance of the religious factor.

In the 1880s, what with antisemitism rife in both western and eastern Europe and social ostracism more widespread in the United States, the "Jewish question" and the issue of Jewish/Christian relations became favorite topics of discussion. At that time, a new note was increasingly heard from Christians who spoke out on the reasons for discrimination. The fault lay, they said, in the exclusiveness and separatism practiced by the Jews. In a symposium conducted by Philip Cowen in 1890 on the causes and the nature of antisemitism, prominent clerics and public figures cited the clannishness of the Jews and their feelings of superiority as the Chosen People. Jewish behavior showed, some respondents said, that Jews were just as prejudiced as Christians.

"How singular," wrote Rabbi Gustav Gottheil, "that, when the Jew attempts to . . . mix freely with his neighbors, he is repelled and unceremoniously shown back to his own tribe; and if he keeps there, he is accused of hereditary and ancestral pride!" The American Hebrew echoed that sentiment and argued that those who raised the charge were motivated by a religious animus. Despite centuries of Christian proselytism Jews retained their "religious autonomy" and refused to merge with the dominant faith. The Jewish Messenger added a bitter comment: other groups set up their separate social institutions, but only Jews were criticized for behaving that way.

Nevertheless, just because it was less crude than the charge that Jews as a group were vulgarians, and just because it was voiced by friends of Jews as well as by their critics, the argument was more troubling. For one thing, it contradicted the claim that the religiously observant Jew was accorded greater respect than his irreligious brother. More important still, it meant that social
amenities and cultured tastes alone did not make the Jew acceptable to society, that Jews who held on to religious practices like dietary laws and the ban on intermarriage were still beyond the pale of respectability. The choice was theirs—traditional Judaism or social acceptance—when in fact they wanted to combine elements of both. Jews knew too that some critics who attacked Jewish separatism (or "tribalism") went on to suggest that clannishness inhibited the Jew from showing proper civic loyalty. The views of one such antisemite, Goldwin Smith, an expatriate professor of history from England, were hotly debated in the United States at this time. Should Americans ever agree with Smith that Jews could not be patriots, the future of American Jewry would indeed look bleak.90

The charge of separatism made some Jews more self-conscious about separate Jewish associations and "self-ghettoization."91 Since established American Jews were in no way growing increasingly exclusive, however, the argument suggests that popular pressure for conformity to the Anglo-Saxon cultural mold, cutting across liberal-conservative lines, was hardening. Jewish religious practices confined to the synagogues were acceptable, particularly if the houses of worship, the style of the service, and the religious functionaries resembled their Protestant counterparts, but customs which impeded free social intercourse with gentiles were undesirable.

The issue of Jewish exclusiveness perforce dashed the hopes of those Jews who called upon the Christian community to shoulder the responsibility for ending the "un-American" discrimination.92 Although the overwhelming body of Church and lay leaders, if asked, would have repudiated prejudice, few had actively campaigned on behalf of the victims.93 Now the latter were faulted and the responsibility was shifted to them. After all, why should Christians extend themselves without evidence of Jewish goodwill or, in this case, of a desire for total assimilation?

Neither social discrimination nor Populism prompted American Jewish spokesmen to deep socioeconomic analyses of the causes for antisemitism. They persisted in holding Christian religious doctrines responsible for hostility against the Jews, and this in turn led to their focus on the potential dangers of religious activism and the fusion of "priestcraft" with politics. The evidence indicates that their worries were grounded in facts. Moreover, they rightly saw that constitutional guarantees alone were not enough of a safeguard for a minority. They recognized two countervailing forces that vitiated the influence of narrow Christian reforms and reformers—America's loyalty to Jeffersonian principles as well as the multiplicity of sects which precluded an effective Pro-
testant union—but they overestimated the drawing power of Christian social activism in a society turning increasingly secularist.

Explaining antisemitism in terms of religious bigotry provided one measure of comfort. It linked the nineteenth century experience with a long history of persecution, saying in effect that Jews had suffered and survived the same hatred before. Yet, even if familiar hostility was better than a new kind, the explanation could generate a resigned, passive, or even fatalistic mood. Nothing the Jews did could change matters radically; in a sense their persecutors too were blameless, since they were merely carrying out the logic of an omnipresent ideology.

Religious animosity set the base, but other factors contributed to its strength. In considering social discrimination Jews noted at least cursorily economic and social factors. They were alert also to the possible reverberations of European antisemitism in the United States, particularly the charge which became popular on both continents that the Jew was the separatist or eternal alien. They feared that the swarms of eastern European immigrants would have on the American image of the Jew, and they worked assiduously to Americanize the new arrivals and to prove the loyalty of all Jews to the nation. Somehow, a nagging fear persisted that self-improvement in manners and culture, and even unassailable patriotism, were not sure panaceas. On one occasion, after dismissing all "rational" reasons for antisemitism, the Jewish Messenger compared the Jew to Dr. Fell of the nursery rhyme: "I do not like thee, Dr. Fell/ The reason why, I can not tell/ But I do not like thee, Dr. Fell."95

Jews did not recognize, or they chose to ignore, other variables that bore upon antisemitism. They never mentioned, much less analyzed, anti-Jewish sentiment on the part of American patricians. They discussed conflicts that erupted in ghetto neighborhoods between Jewish immigrants and members of other ethnic groups, but they drew no conclusions whether such inter-ethnic tensions fed antisemitism; nor did they connect charges of Jewish separatism or Jew-baiting by the Populists with currents of heightened nationalism. They knew about the teachings of racism, but they preferred to disregard them. Racism meant permanence and immutability, and it thwarted hopes for any improvement in Jewish/Christian relationships.

The only common denominator which Jews saw as binding the various causes of Jew-hatred was ignorance and bigotry. The antisemite, be he a religious crusader, hotel keeper, or Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina, represented an appeal to the uneducated who retained their traditional and unreasonable prejudices. Although he had to be exposed and combated wherever he raised his head, the bigot's days were numbered. The forces of education, enlightenment, and democracy, the Jews liked to believe, would
eventually prevail.

Jewish belief in the inevitability of progress, at least in the United States if not universally, 97 may have been a wish-fulfilling prophecy about the security of American Jewry. Still it moderated feelings of pessimism that discrimination invoked, and it also encouraged Jews to resist movements that impeded the march of democracy. These were directed not only against them but also against Catholics, Chinese and Blacks.98 As was the case in western Europe, American Jewish group interests in the nineteenth century fused almost automatically with the liberal side. American Jews, however, wanted more than the liberal's insistence on the rights of the individual. Of whatever stripe, most Jewish spokesmen affirmed the desirability of Jewish group survival. They would never have countenanced total assimilation as the price for acceptance into gentile society.99 Improving one's manners was desirable, but they warned that the Jew must not compromise his religion or his self-respect.100 As nineteenth century Jews learned, protection of the group was infinitely harder than protecting the rights of its individual members. Even liberals favored homogeneity and looked askance at Jewish differences. Only in the aftermath of Hitler, the establishment of the State of Israel, and the upsurge of ethnicity generally did Jewish group freedom in the United States gain an aura of respectability.

NOTES


5. *Jewish Messenger* (hereafter called *JM*), 16 Sept. 1864.
11. *Asmonean*, 16 Aug. and 27 Dec. 1850; *Israelite*, 20 June 1856; *Occident* (hereafter called *Occ*), 12 (1855), 559.


29. AI, 21 Apr., 12, 19 May 1876, 12 Jan. 1877.

30. See for example, Dwight L. Moody, Glad Tidings (New York, 1877), pp. 264, 289, 293 ff., 401–403.


32. AI, 26 Dec. 1884; Richard K. Curtis, They Called Him Mister Moody (Garden City, New York, 1962), p. 280. Moody stated that he did not believe the newspaper reports about Adolf Stoecker. Moody was also criticized publicly when he blamed the Jews for influencing the Freemasons of France to give up the Bible. See JM, 18 Dec. 1896.


34. Bernard A. Weisberger, They Gathered at the River (Chicago, 1966), Ch. 7; Findlay, Moody, pp. 277–89.

35. AI, 1 July 1881.


40. AI, 18 Apr. 1884, 6 Apr. 1888; JM, 7, 21, Mar. 1884; UAHC, Proceedings, 1884, p. 1563.

41. AI, 7 May 1880; Congressional Record, 46 Cong. 2 Sess., pp. 2325, 2360, 2630–31.
42. A personal account of alienation in the classroom was written by Rabbi Henry Berkowitz, *AI*, 5 Dec. 1889.


46. See for example, *JM*, 9 Aug. 1889; *AI*, 15 Sept. 1892.

47. Schappes, *Documentary History*, p. 552; *JM*, 30 May 1879.


52. Cited in Kellogg, *Jews, or Prediction*, p. 188.


60. One article appeared in the *AI*, 30 July 1896, on how the Jews were not represented among the trusts, or oppressors, and how Jews who serviced the farmer and the worker through small businesses depended on those classes for their own well-being.


64. *JM*, 6 Nov. 1896 and editorials almost weekly from July through October; see also Jesse Seligman, “The Silver Question Again,” *North American Review* (hereafter called *NAR*), 152 (1891), 204–208.


69. *AI*, 16 June 1876, 29 June 1877.

70. *Ibid.*, 25 July, 1 Aug. 1879, 25 Aug. 1882; *JM*, 22 June 1877; Alice Hyneman Rhine, “Race Prejudice at Summer Resorts,” *Forum*, 3 (1887), 527. Although some Jews liked to blame the Russian immigrants, who began arriving in great numbers after 1881, for arousing prej-
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udice, the Jewish press did not think the accusation was just. *AI*, 8 July 1887 (Leucht); *AH*, 31 Dec. 1887, 31 July 1896.


75. See for example, editorials of 13 May 1881, 26 July, 23 Aug., 13 Sept. 1889, 4 Apr. 1890, 30 Sept. 1898.


77. *Ibid.*, 14 Jan. 1887 (Furth); *AI*, 6 June 1889. Austin Corbin, when interviewed by the *New York Herald*, said that discrimination was a matter of social esthetics and not religion. To this the *AI* rejoined: “The man would be too consummate an ass in the estimation of every intelligent individual, if he, in 1879, and in the United States, would talk of religious persecution,” 1 Aug. 1879.

78. *JM*, 22 June 1877; *AI*, 29 June 1877, 23 May 1889.

79. Morais, “Jewish Ostracism,” pp. 271-72. Alice Hyneman Rhine, from an old and prominent Jewish family, also maintained that “the refusal of the Jews to accept the divinity of Christ, with their terrible responsibility for the crucifixion, is an ever-present ground of dislike in the Christian mind. The antipathy felt toward the Jews as deicides is hardly less strong to-day than it was in the times when the Hebrew was . . . under the ban of state and church. Hatred and contempt for the Jew the infant imbibes with its mother’s milk, and it is intensified by the teachings of governesses, Sunday-schools, and church.” Rhine, “Race Prejudice,” p. 529.

80. That was the opinion of most clergymen polled in a symposium on antisemitism in 1890. Cowen, *Prejudice*, passim.


85. *JM*, 26 June 1877, 26 Sept. 1879; *AI*, 18 Nov. 1881.


89. See for example, *JM*, 22 Nov. 1872; *AH*, 3 July 1896.

91. See for example, JM, 12 Feb., 3 June 1892, 5 Oct. 1900 (Moise).
92. Ibid., 20 July 1877, 17 May, 12 July 1889, 5 Sept. 1890; AI, 16 May 1889; AH, 23 Aug., 13 Sept. 1889.
93. One notable exception was Rev. Madison C. Peters who lectured and wrote on the injustice done to the Jew. JM, 7 Feb. 1902; AH, 1 Sept. 1899; Madison C. Peters, Justice to the Jew (London, 1897).
94. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century the Anglo-Jewish press hammered away at the immigrants, warning them against radicalism and ghettoization. Simultaneously Jewish philanthropists supported settlement houses for teaching the new arrivals English and civics.
95. JM, 6 July 1877.
96. Higham, Send These To Me, pp. 134–35.
97. Jewish optimism with respect to Europe was badly shaken in the last quarter of the nineteenth century by antisemitism in Germany, the Russian pogroms, and the Dreyfus affair.
98. See note 45. For editorials sympathetic to the Blacks and Chinese, see JM, 24 July 1885, 12, 19 Feb., 12 Mar. 1886, 10 Aug. 1900; AH, 24 Mar., 21 Apr., 19 May 1881, 24 Aug. 1900.
100. JM, 14 Jan. 1887 (Furth), 21 Apr. 1889; AH, 9 May 1884, 17 May, 11 Oct. 1889, 2 Jan. 1891 (Hays); AI, 23 May 1889; Jastrow, Causes, pp. 10–13.